

Community Health Advisors

October 1999

Taking action to improve one's health is difficult. It can mean changing conditions like limited access to care, inadequate housing, lack of education, and poverty. Also, it often involves lifelong habits and beliefs. Without establishing trust and support, and articulating a means for change, we can't expect people to make difficult changes. This is especially true of those who, on top of everything else, are isolated, wary of the health system, or who have different cultural experiences. One of the best ways for public health programs to establish strong relationships with underserved populations is through a Community Health Advisor (CHA). Also known as a Promotora or Lay Health Worker, a CHA helps individuals and groups take more control of decisions and actions that affect their health.

Community health advisors have specialized training, are often bilingual, and are of the same ethnic and cultural background as the population they serve. By living and working in the community, they are effective in establishing trust and confidence as a friend, neighbor and co-worker. They are a voice for those who aren't heard.

Role of Community Health Advisor

A Cultural mediation between communities and the health and social services system

- Help community members navigate and understand the health care and social services systems
- Gather information for medical providers
- Educate medical and social service providers about community needs
- Facilitate patient-provider communication by "translating" medical terminology into lay language.

"Lay health workers, who so effectively bridge gaps between the haves and have nots of our society, play a significant role in creating a democracy of knowledge and a democracy of health."

*Joel Meister
Director of
Prevention Research*

*Mariposa Community
Health Center, Arizona*

- B Informal counseling and social support**
- Lead support groups, such as a cooking class for diabetic women or cancer survivor support group
 - Provide social support for individuals with limited resources due to poverty, isolation or discrimination.

- C Culturally appropriate health education**
- Teach concepts of health promotion and disease prevention using interactive adult education methods
 - Reinforce messages to promote nutrition, physical activity, tobacco and drug prevention in ways that can realistically be accomplished
 - Train individuals in how to manage chronic illness, such as diabetes and hypertension.

- D Advocacy**
- Push for policies and environmental changes that will encourage healthy behavior
 - Advocate for individuals as intermediaries between them and bureaucracies
 - Advocate for community needs that involve specific issues, such as improvement of conditions in a migrant labor camp.

- E Assuring people get the services they need**
- Recognize symptoms of health problems and connect people to the health care system
 - Make referrals to a broad range of health and social services
 - Provide follow-up to promote continuity of care, such as helping a parent complete a child's immunization series.

- F Direct services**
- Provide clinical services especially in remote areas where health care is not accessible
 - Meet basic needs including adequate housing and food before sharing specific health information.

Example 1:
***People of Color
Against AIDS Network
(POCAAN)***

Standing on a ladder picking apples in the Yakima Valley, a Community Health Worker named Jim is talking with his fellow farmworkers about ways to protect themselves against AIDS. In the still valley air his voice travels. After the day's picking, several compadres meet him at his truck to pick up educational information and condoms. Jim is seen as a leader among his peers. He works fulltime in the orchards and 20 hours a week for POCAAN. His good relationship with local growers resulted in POCAAN setting up an HIV testing site in the orchard. Employees are encouraged to get tested during their work hours.

Qualities of Successful Community Health Advisors

When interviewing candidates for CHA positions, look for these skill and qualities:

- Good communication skills including the ability to listen and use language confidently
- Commitment to the well-being and health of the community
- Ability to work as part of a team and work appropriately with diverse groups of people
- Knowledge of the community, specific health issues, and the health and social service systems
- Ability to network and identify community resources
- Caring, friendly personality
- Ability to speak up for individuals or communities
- Organizational skills such as the ability to set goals, juggle priorities, and manage time
- Ability to identify problems and resources
- Belief that people have the capacity to solve their own problems with knowledge and support
- Ability to share information in a group setting or one-on-one.

Example 2:

First Steps Prenatal Program in Washington State

First Steps is part of the Medicaid program for low-income pregnant women. Community Health Advisors provide education and support to pregnant and postpartum women. They function as part of a team that includes a nurse, nutritionist, social worker, and case manager. During a clinic or home visit a Community Health Worker might discuss the benefits of breastfeeding with a new mother or connect a family to day care services. First Steps Programs are encouraged to hire bilingual, bicultural women from the community. Many of them work in programs that serve Hispanic or Native American communities.

Resources

A Summary of the National Community Health Advisor Study:

Weaving the Future, The University of Arizona Health Sciences Center.

Funded by Annie E. Casey Foundation. To obtain a copy call: 410-223-2890
or FAX: 410-547-6624

Community Facilitator Training Manual, Community Health Advisor
Network, Center for Community Health, University of Southern Mississippi,
Box 5122 Hattiesburg, MS 39406-5122. To obtain a copy call: 601-266-5437
or FAX: 601-266-5043

Community Health Advisors: Models, Research, and Practice,

Selected Annotations, United States, Volumes I and II, September 1994, U.S.
Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention, 4770 Buford Hwy, NE, Mailstop K-56, Atlanta, GA 30341-3724,
404-488-5440

Combined Health Information Database (CHID), National Center for
Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Centers for Disease
Control and Prevention. Web site: <http://chid.nih.gov/> (there is a link to
CHID through the www.HEREinWA.org Web site)

Community Health Advisors Training Resources, Healthy Mothers
Healthy Babies Coalition, 703-836-6110

Community Health Training and Development Center

http://thecity.sfsu.edu/~chtdc/chtdc_pub.html



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Material adapted from ***A Summary of the National Community
Health Advisor Study: Weaving the Future***, University of Arizona
Health Sciences Center, 1998